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**Development of musical taste in public school music education:  
do we really need Western trends?**

*To involve popular music in school music education is not an unknown phenomenon in Western European Countries. Education in the first ten years play crucial role in human cognitive development. At the same time the majority of our pupils meet valuable musical material only at public schools. This is the reason, why popular music should never get an exclusive place in the tuition of primary-school aged children. Theoretical background of my paper are Kodaly's sentences. I intend to support my hypothesis by the means of a questionnaire among primary-school-teachers and pupils coming from different social and geographical background.*

Epigraph:

*„Musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace, and making the soul of him who is rightly educated graceful... while he praises and rejoices over and receives into his soul the good, and becomes noble and good.”*

[Plato: The Republic, Book III (398-403)]

### **1. Popular music in primary school?**

Having been a member of the academic staff of a teachers' training college for primary school teachers (for grades 1-4), I have often been faced with the students's request to integrate popular music in the primary school music curriculum for the first four grades. Their attitude towards the conventional school material - dictated by the National Core Curriculum (NCC) – is highly critical and often dismissive. They justify their negative approach with the argument that the central curriculum is outdated, and in connection to this, they frequently use the expression „suffering”.

They would make use of popular music as an element of the music training, even though they are not sufficiently well-versed in it, and I can change their attitude only at the price of very hard work. I observe this phenomenon with an increasing concern while trying to remedy

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their prejudice. On the other hand, I was curious to find out whether I was the only educator feeling this way. Do generational or socio-cultural differences result in the increasing advancement of popular music in primary music education or even in kindergarden?

My hypotheses were the following:

- It is determined not only by the former musical training of future teachers but also by the context they continue their careers in.
- Those teaching with a college or university-level music degree will be more interested in the question of use of popular music in class. They tend to be more concerned about this phenomenon, as the methodology of Hungarian music education based on Kodály's principles do not contain any popular musical elements. Although many of the students use the term „popular music”, they do not understand it and thus cannot formulate what they wish to achieve.
- The popular musical bias can be much rather traced back to the need to change the curriculum or to the poor knowledge of future teachers in this regard.
- To prove or disprove my hypotheses, I have consulted not only the results of relevant research studies but also the guidelines of the NCC. I have also composed a questionnaire and conducted in-depth interviews with two primary school teachers for grades 1-4.

## 2. The provisions of the NCC and the Swedish model

The National Core Curriculum (2012)

*“In Hungary, the basis of music education is the practice of music pedagogy that stems from the Kodály method. It is a pedagogical method that develops all aspects of the personality and is focussed on the education of open and creative persons who have general European knowledge, preserve and interpret the Hungarian national tradition and actively participate in community life. The core of the music study material consists of European classical masterpieces and folk music.”*

The English translation of the NCC significantly differs from the Hungarian original, therefore it is important to highlight one more of the original sentences:

*“The foundation of good musical judgement is highly important, with its help, individuals become capable of discerning valuable from the invaluable.”* (National Core Curriculum, 2012, p. 56.)<sup>2</sup>

In the first four grades of primary school, the number of music classes has risen to 2 lessons/week. This is a welcome change, as from the perspective of cognitive development, this is one of the most receptive period. In grades 5-8, there is only one music lesson left per week. In some member states of the European Union (e.g. Greece, Poland, Estonia and Slovenia, etc.), music education is based mainly on singing, and the planning of the music instruction programme is determined by the pedagogical concepts of Kodály, Willems, Geoffroy (a Coeur joie). In other member states of the EU, – where Orff and Suzuki’s methodology is followed – the use of instruments is quite widespread. ISME suggests that the institutional music pedagogical curriculum of all nations should include their own traditional folk music, Western classical music as well as as much international music as possible and the music of nations and ethnicities.<sup>3</sup>

The core music material for grades 1-4 does not only contain traditional folk games and folk songs but also compositions of well-established literary value (such as poems by Sándor Weöres, Ami Károlyi or pieces by Zoltán Kodály and Pál Járdányi). Popular music in the curriculum is represented by the children songs written by Vilmos Gryllus. At the same time, the official general curriculum is highly discerning in this respect: only well-established, musically or literally highly valuable popular music pieces got selected.

In teacher training and in higher music education, more and more people use the Swedish model as a reference while arguing for the integration of popular music in music instruction. The music material of the Swedish National Core Curriculum is not just important from the perspective of the topic of this paper. The Swedish model is just one of the most cited European practices, in which popular music genres gain foot in primary school (grades 1-4) music instruction. The Scandinavian model is clearly based on different traditions than the Hungarian, Kodály-method based music pedagogy. However, the dominance of popular music has become controversial there as well. The research proposal of David Johnson’s PhD dissertation discussed the place of traditional music material in school instruction. (Johnson 2016, pp. 17-20.) The Swedish core curriculum follows the American model also in the realm of educational goals. Popular music was entered into the school curriculum within the framework of the 1969

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<sup>2</sup> For more see NCC 2012: 51-57

<sup>3</sup> Detailed in L. Nagy: 2012.

education reform. (Johnson 2016, p. 10) The advocates of popular music justified their choice with the openness to cultural diversity and to various folk cultures. Besides, there is also an approach present that regards students as consumers. (Johnson 2016, p. 10) This and future reforms did not incorporate all layers of popular music into the curriculum, however. Children had difficulty in singing the new material, and the quality of the lyrics could not be reconciled with the values of the school. The instruction could not keep pace with the progress of the wide-ranging and ever-changing popular music world. For this reason, the new, mostly popular-music based school music material also requires revision. This means that even the Swedish model advocating the wide use of popular music has been overcome by the crisis, which is presently characteristic of our own music education as well. The solution must therefore be sought not necessarily in the vocal material, but much rather in the area of methodology.

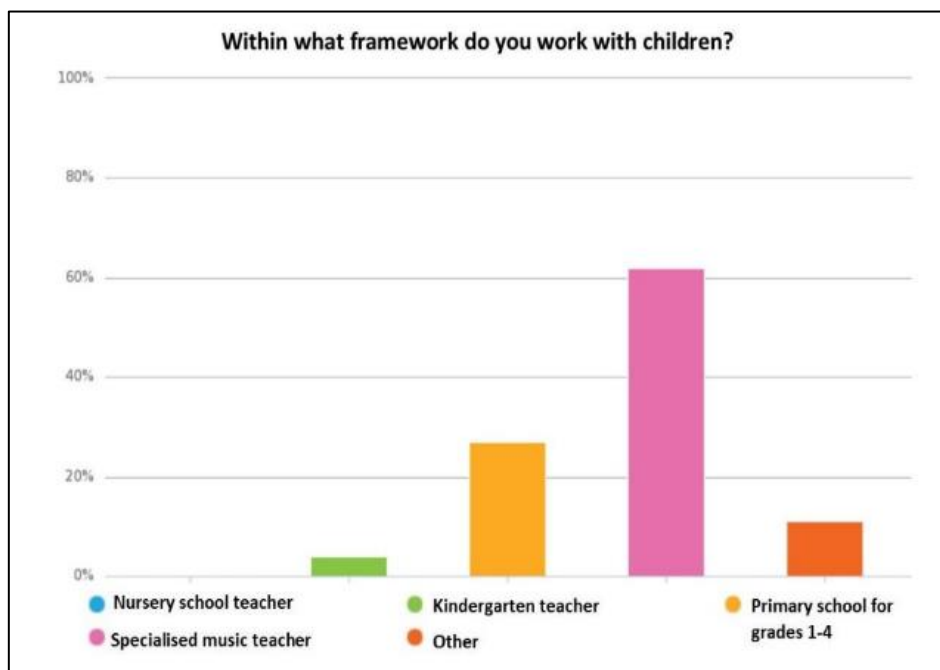
Apart from this, it is also a noteworthy fact that the traditional music material in the first four grades of primary school was not replaced even in the flexible Scandinavian pedagogical context with popular music. According to Eva Kjellander's study (2005), in the first four grades of Swedish primary school, the emphasis is on traditional Swedish folk music and sung children's games— just like in Hungarian kindergartens. (Johnson 2016, p. 14)<sup>4</sup> In this field, stakeholders didn't succumb to social pressure as much as in higher grades of primary and in secondary school.

### 3. Survey results

While conducting my survey, I sought to address all educators who are qualified to teach music in kindergartens and in grades 1-4 in primary school. Kindergarten teachers were in my pool of informants because the song material used in the first two years of primary school are based on the material sung and played in kindergarten. 16 questions in the questionnaire were answered by 100 teachers, as it was accessible on teachers' portals open to teachers with musical qualifications and kindergarten teachers.

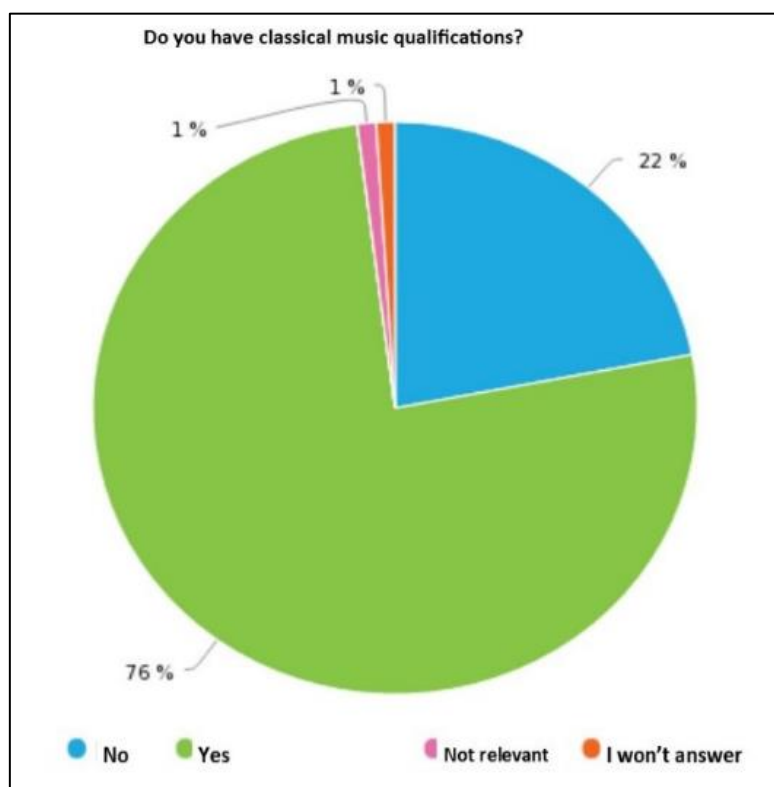
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<sup>4</sup> Kjellander, Eva. (2005) *Sitter ekornen fortfarande i granen?*, C- uppsats i musikvetenskap. Växjö: Växjö Universitet. Cited in: Johnson 2016: 14.



**Figure 1. Within what framework do you work with children?**

It is a remarkable fact that qualified music teachers were especially willing to answer the question, in fact three times as many of them as general primary school teachers. Among those with other qualifications, we can find qualified musicians, church musicians, piano accompanists and instrumental teachers. The questionnaire was much less popular with kindergarten teachers, while nursery school teachers were even less inclined to give answers.



**Figure 2. Do you have classical music qualifications?**

Only little more than 40% of the informants were primary school teachers for grades 1- 4. Most of them were involved in other, mostly directly musical activities or worked with other age groups. So why were those teachers so ready to answer the questions who work with grades 5- 8 or secondary school children?

Children’s musical taste can be best shaped in the first four years of primary school, when the personality, orientations and value ranking of the teachers are most decisive. The children cannot tell classical and popular music apart, or they do not yet know the joy of classical music. They mostly bring prejudice against it from home or from their immediate environment.<sup>5</sup> If the primary school teacher for grades 1- 4 do not approach this question in the correct manner or succumb to the pressures of our consumer society or their own personal taste, teachers of higher grades with higher musical qualifications will have to face a much more difficult situation. It is bolstered by the fact that at this age (in higher grades), children are influenced mainly by their peers. It is the teacher in grades 5-8 responsible for the pupils’ musical or – in fact – aesthetic education who is first confronted with the children’s musical training in kindergarten and in the first four grades. In case this education was not thoughtful, well- considered and methodologically well-grounded, the efforts of the music teacher for grades 5-8 – also due to the reduced number of classes - is much impaired in various aspects. It is therefore quite understandable why they are interested in this issue.

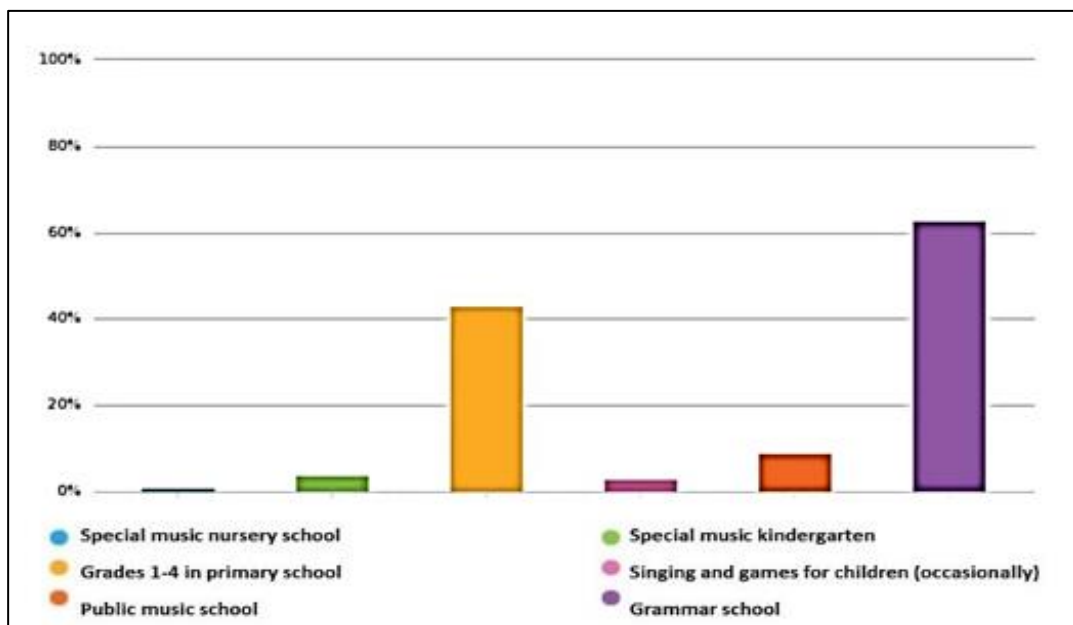
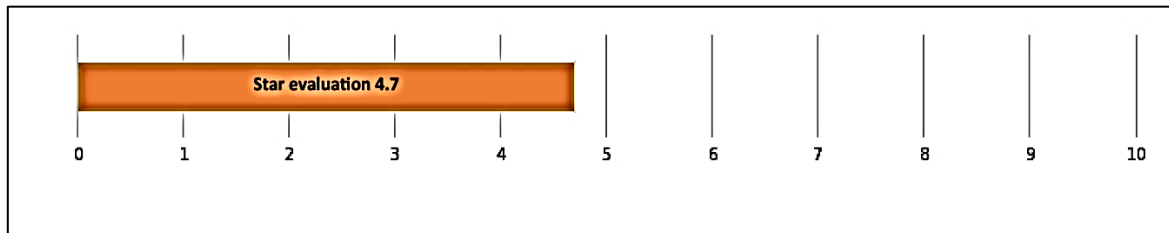


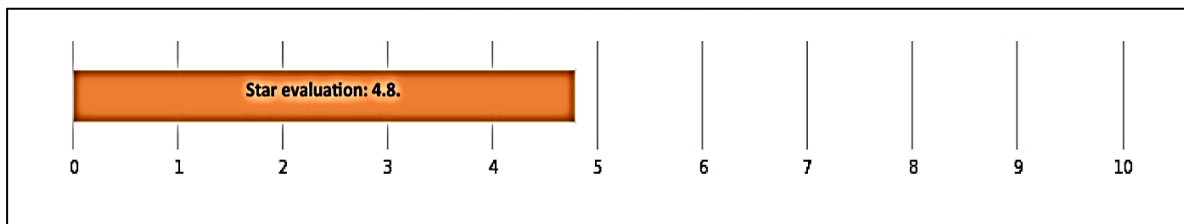
Figure 3: At what level do you teach music?

<sup>5</sup> „Let’s listen to AC/DC today! -Do you know that band? – Yes. – Do you often listen to them? – Yes. – Do you know Johann Sebastian Bach’s music? – No.- Then let’s listen to that so that you get to know it too.” Conversation before class between teacher of the 2nd grade and her pupil. Mihalovics-Kismartony-Kolosai 2016: 241.

Only half of the informants attend classical music concerts. These data are rather astonishing, as 80% of them have college or university level music qualifications. In other words, a significant number of them have lost contact with live music. As far as classical music listening habits are concerned, these results are almost identical with those of college or university graduates.

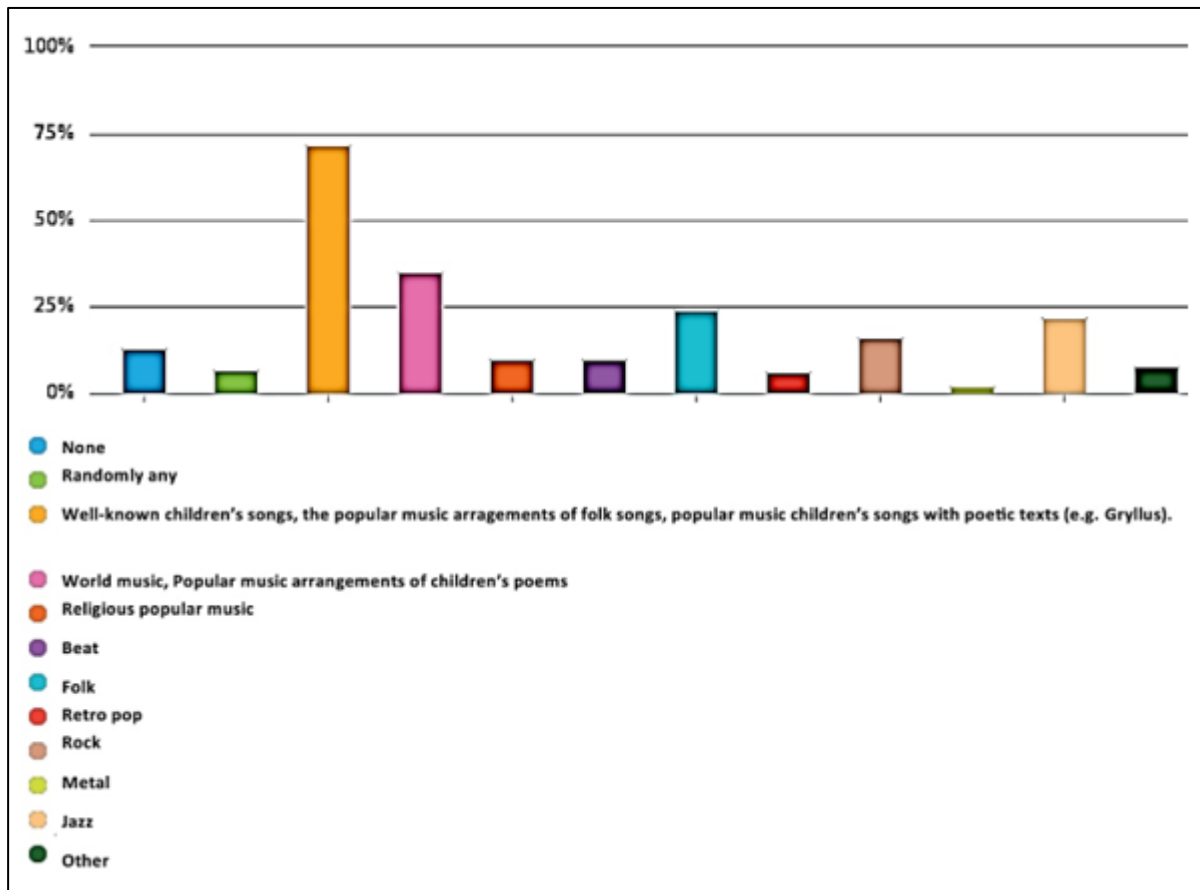


**Figure 4. Do you apply music excerpts in the classroom?**



**Figure 5. Do you think to listen to popular music during classroom-activities?**

47% of the participants of the survey use popular music excerpts during their classes, and 48% find it clearly useful in the music instruction of children under the age of 10. From the individual responses, it become obvious that most of those teachers who are in favour of this practice are currently active.



**Figure 6. Which popular music genres do you prefer using in the classroom?**

Most informants voted for the classroom use of well-known folk and children's songs and the popular musical re-arrangements of children's poetry as well as for world music, but country and jazz also came up in the answers of nearly  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the participants. In the category „other”, they recommended, moreover, gospel and swing. It was surprising that besides the popular music dedicated especially to children – like Gryllus's songs -, they also selected popular music genres that appear at a consumer level in their everyday life. The quality of the lyrics was mentioned as a criterion only by one informant, i.e. foul language was a reason for dismissal of a particular song. All in all, their choices primarily reflected their own musical taste and not the direct development need of the children.



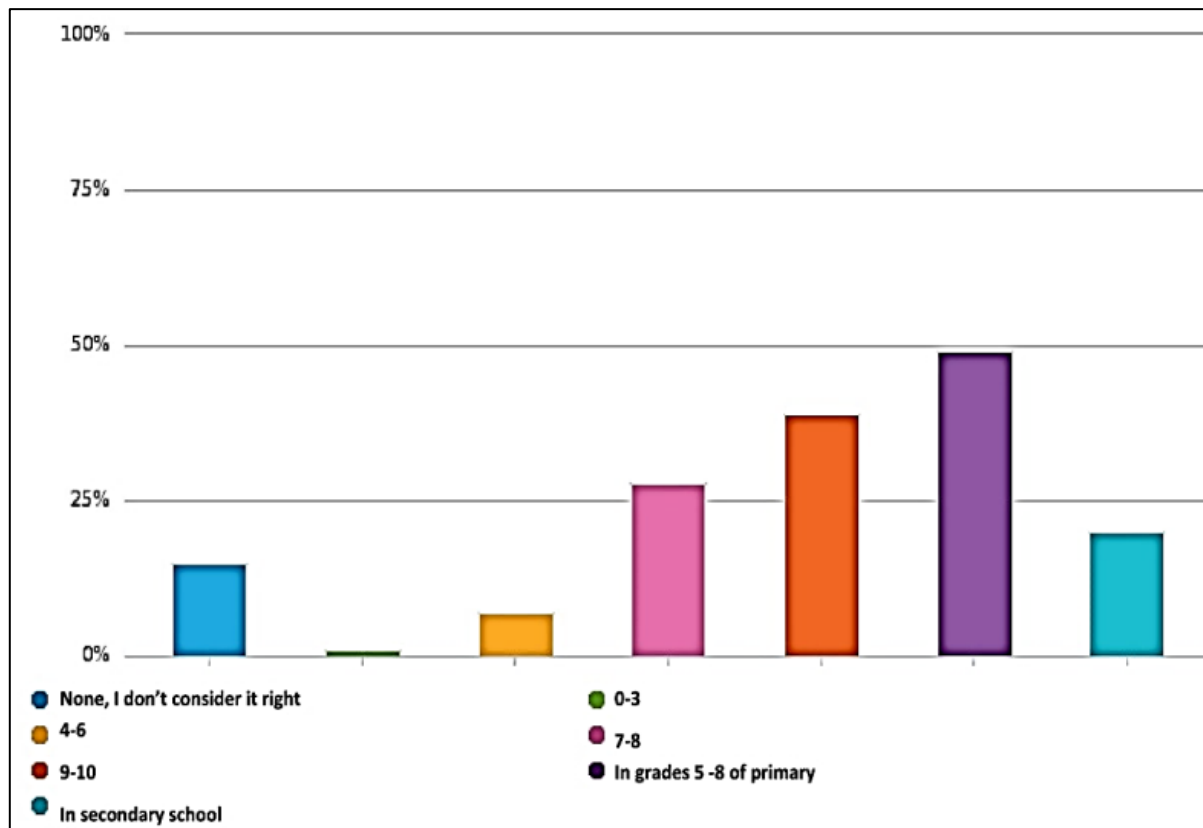


Figure 7. For which age group do you apply popular music?

Nearly 40% of the respondents apply popular music excerpts in classes as early as 9 years of age, while the majority approve of this only in higher grades and in secondary school. This is not surprising, if we consider the composition of the pool of informants and their professional activities.

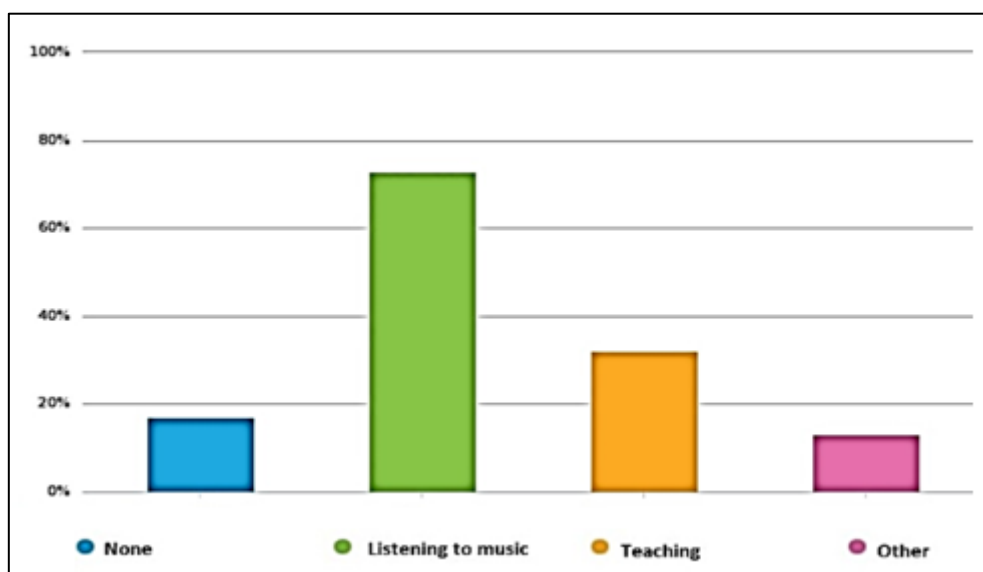


Figure 8. In what activity-types do you apply popular music excerpts?

A clear majority of teachers play various popular music genres as material to listen to during class. ¼ of them use similar materials for teaching songs. For the question: „For what activity-types do you apply popular music?“, several activity-types were listed, such as the popular musical re-arrangement of classical compositions (which is a questionable tool when we try to refine musical taste), the editing of festivity programmes, thematic tasks, musical games (no game description was given, though), closing task at the end of class and finally, as the background music of free drawing.

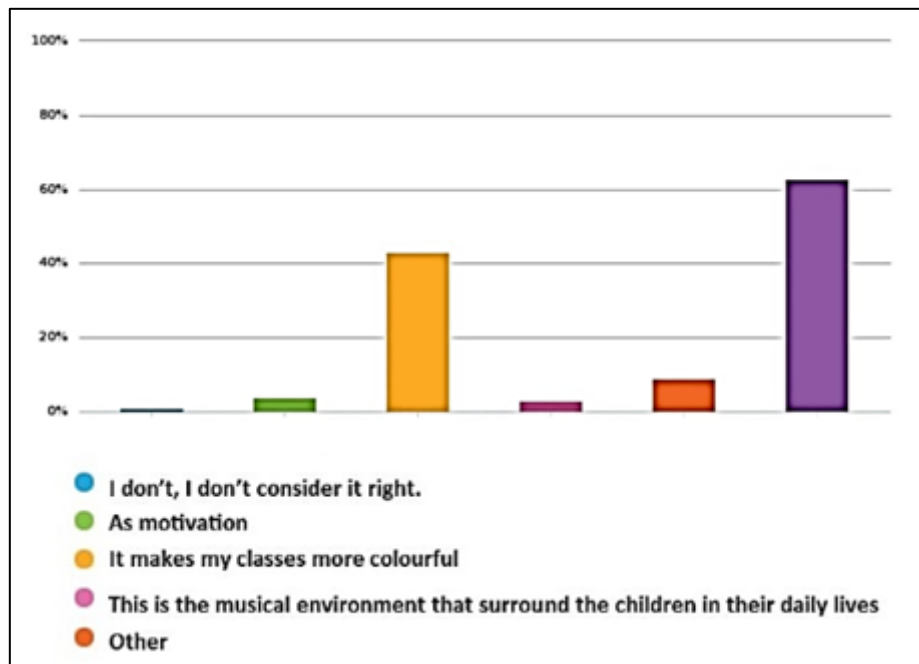


Figure 9. Why did you begin to use popular music in the classroom?

Most teachers aimed to use popular music to motivate their pupils, to make their classes more colourful and varied.

When it was introduced, the Kodály-method was also rooted in the children's natural environment, and about half of the respondents now justified their popular music choice with the same argument in the first half of the 21st century. The issue of a musical environment was raised on several occasions in this study. It is, however, clear that children brought up in an urban environment were surrounded by a different kind of musical world than their peers in the countryside, even in Bartók and Kodály's time. No wonder that a popular music-oriented audience (raised to listen to operettas) received Kodály and Bartók's first folk song arrangements written or the concert hall with considerable aversion. The purpose of the Kodály-

Ádám Songbooks<sup>6</sup> was not to give a musical documentation of the era but was a decisive effort to preserve and maintain our „musical mother tongue”. The two music educators and composers consciously chose the treasures of Hungarian folk music, providing an appropriate alternative to the superficiality of the popular music-oriented taste of the period. It would be quite an interesting question why no excerpts from operettas were included in the primary school music curriculum then, if this was the prevailing musical environment of the children at the time.

When we make an analogy of our modern world with its consumer approach to Kodály, Bartók and Ádám while writing textbooks, we raise the question why they did not incorporate songs from operettas in their music instruction material, perhaps with texts adapted for the children’s age groups. It is no accident that they chose not to do this, and their efforts were proved right by time.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Based on the results of neuro-psychological research, it is now clear that the composition of the music curriculum for grades 1-4 of primary school is not only a crucial issue from the perspective of the material itself. Primary school teachers of this age group play a complex part in their pupils’ personality development, in other words, lay the foundation for the children’s healthy development and learning processes. Their choice of material is not only the question of taste but also serious responsibility.

A methodologically well-qualified, creative and gifted educator can motivate children with any kind of music genre, thus also with traditional children’s games, folk songs and classical music. According to the research results, the wrong choice of material – justifying my third hypothesis – is the consequence of low informedness with regards to music.

If we consider the teaching staff of schools in Budapest, it cannot escape our attention that in the first four grades of primary school, there are relatively few specialised teachers in proportion to the number of schools. Musical subjects are taught by university-educated music teachers only in special music primary schools. In schools with a general curriculum, this task is performed by general primary school teachers. For this reason, teacher training has a great responsibility in ensuring that by the end of the training, qualified primary school teachers are not only able to use and select the traditional vocal materials creatively and with good taste but also to expand it. This can be done, however, only if they have the necessary and appropriate methodological skills. Should future teachers not have the necessary inventory or have not seen

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<sup>6</sup> For more, see Kecskés 2017.

good practice, they will automatically go for the easier choice. It is therefore not the teacher training itself that has to alter the school material based on the National Core Curriculum, but teacher trainers should simply not give in to the pressure coming from their students. Instead, proper tools should be given in their hands which will enable them to hold enjoyable lessons with the help of the traditional vocal material and to make use of these skills while teaching any other subject as well. Children – as we learn from the survey – are open to everything, if we present it to them in the appropriate way.

Besides, the school material based on Hungarian folk music traditions is a special treasure of the Hungarian heritage, which we are obliged to maintain and preserve. In this regard, our national curriculum does not have to agree with that of other member states of the EU, as our traditions differ from theirs. The vocal material written for the first four grades of primary school helps the pupils – even through the texts – to be able to find their place in the middle of Europe and to be sure of their identity.

The Swedish model is by no means more successful than the Hungarian one: it is also faced with a crisis, needs renewal, just like the Hungarian model which is based on Kodály's pedagogical principles. Furthermore, the Swedish music curriculum must undergo change much more frequently, as consumer habits and consequently, also the characteristics of popular music change much more rapidly than those of long-established traditional music genres.

*„In everyday life, we expect music to help us „chill out”, „relax” and to „distance us from our daily troubles...”. Valuable music, however – as opposed to invaluable one – does not only fulfil these requirements but is also thought-provoking. Listening to music requires conscious and complete concentration. The most important domain of music education is school, it plays therefore a decisive role in the elimination of prejudices against classical music.”* (Mihalovics–Kismartony–Kolosai 2016, p. 244.)

If the teacher, however, is not motivated to develop their pupils' musical taste, they will impose their own – sometimes bad – taste on them. These children will not be able to make correct judgements in the question of „good music” and bad music”. This argument is no less important than the ones listed above. As far as the pupils' development areas are concerned, it is by no means insignificant what music material we use during the classes of the first four grades of primary school.

My research survey did not confirm sufficiently my first hypothesis. It would be worthwhile, however, to examine in a nationwide, all-around (in all school types) study, to what extent our consumer society, the socio-cultural environment (can) exert influence on the

pedagogical activity of primary school teachers (in grades 1-4) in the various individual types of school.

It would also be important to ask ourselves the question whether education, which is planned for long-term cycles, can or should be subjected to a consumer society which undergoes change much more frequently? In other words: are we to subject education to the increasingly fast paced social changes, and to what extent do they serve the interests of our children?

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